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Spy Watchers Outmanned By Communist Operatives

FBI Tracks About 1,300 Agents

By John Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

FBI agents who keep track of about 1,300 intelligence operatives from Communist countries in the United States are overworked and sometimes overwhelmed in their efforts to prevent espionage, according to intelligence experts and members of Congress specializing in intelligence.

Times have changed since the 1950s, when there were only a few hundred Soviet bloc personnel in the United States, and the FBI had approximately as many counterintelligence agents on the street as there were known agents of the KGB, the Soviet intelligence agency. Nowadays, according to a spokesman for the Senate intelligence committee, the ratio of our agents to the number of people they have to watch is "unquestionably unfavorable" for the United States.

"From the [Senate intelligence] committee's point of view, there's no question we've not recovered sufficiently from the time a few years ago when we cut back on our intelligence efforts, at the same time the Soviets were increasing their numbers here," a committee staff member said.

Even a one-to-one ratio, designed to ensure ability to follow each hostile agent, "doesn't begin to answer the problem," said Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), the House intelligence committee's chairman. "The problem is monumental .... We have some catching up to do."

For their part, FBI officials say they are handling the workload.

"We can use more people and resources, but we're certainly not overwhelmed," said Edward J. O'Malley, chief of the FBI's intelligence division. "We're not daunted by it."

The exact numbers of FBI counterintelligence agents is classified, and O'Malley last week described as "grossly understated" published reports that there are only 300 to 400 such agents. The FBI has substantially beefed up its budget for counterintelligence agents in the past five years.

The Walker spy case, in which retired Navy warrant officer John A. Walker Jr. and three associates are charged with espionage, has prompted a new round of concern on Capitol Hill, where the Senate and House Intelligence Committees have been holding closed-door hearings for several weeks on the United States' spy-catching effort.

"The Walker case illustrates the FBI's difficulties," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the Senate Intelligence Committee's vice chairman. "The number of Soviet and East European officials in this country is simply too great for the FBI to monitor their activities adequately."

An Unglamorous Job

Foreign counterintelligence, or "f.c.i.," which seeks to locate spies and neutralize or manipulate them, and sometimes arrest them, is a complex and mistrustful line of work, replete with false defectors, double agents and other trickery.

But it is far from the glamorous portrait of spies and counterspies painted by many movies and novels.

"The business of counterespionage is a Dantean hell with 99 circles, and the men who dare its enigmas without exception have thick glasses, a midnight pallor, stomach ulcers, a love of fly fishing, and fretful wives," wrote journalist Thomas Powers in a book about the CIA.

Most of the work of FBI counterintelligence agents is quite humdrum, involving almost 24-hour-a-day monitoring of agents of the KGB and intelligence agencies of other Communist countries. Using high-technology gear, FBI agents tap their telephones, listen in to their offices and cars, intercept their coded messages, photograph visitors to their embassies, and "tail" the intelligence officers in cars wherever the agents go.

"The basic idea of counterintelligence is to make it riskier and more time-consuming for the other service to operate," said one retired ranking FBI counterintelligence official. "You get awfully good at crossword puzzles, and eating in your car."

There are the constant decisions whether to assign agents to watch, for example, the Polish diplomatic couple driving across country for vacation or the suspicious Soviet scholar at the trade conference, they said.

"One continuing fact of counterintelligence is you're almost always behind," one said. "You're always in a sense pushing to narrow that gap."

Starting with the era of peaceful coexistence in the 1960s, the numbers of Communist nations' officials in this country—including embassy and consular employes, United Nations representatives, trade officers and journalists—has shot up. It has doubled to almost 4,000 in the past decade, the FBI's O'Malley said. He, and other intelligence experts, estimate that one-third of them are trained intelligence agents.

Most FBI surveillance cars have at least two agents each. More sen-

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